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Author(s): Raymond J. Clark

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A Note on Medea's Plant and the Mandrake¹

RAYMOND J. CLARK

πρωτοφύες τόγ' ἀνέσχε καταστάξαντος ἔραζε 851
 αἰετοῦ ὠμηστέω κνημοῖς ἐνὶ Καυκασίοισιν
 αἱματόεντ' ἰχῶρα Προμηθῆος μογεροῖο.
 τοῦ δ' ἦτοι ἄνθος μὲν ὅσον πήχυιον ὑπερθεν
 χροῖῃ Κωρυκίῳ ἵκελον κρόκῳ ἐξεφάνθη, 855
 καυλοῖσιν διδύμοισιν ἐπήγορον· ἡ δ' ἐνὶ γαίῃ
 σαρκὶ νεοτμήτῳ ἐναλγική ἔπλετο ρίζα.
 τῆς οἶν τ' ἐν ὄρεσσι κελαινὴν ἱκμάδα φηγοῦ
 Κασπίῃ ἐν κόχλῳ ἀμήσατο φαρμάσσεσθαι,
 ἐπτὰ μὲν ἀενάοισι λοεσσαμένη ὑδάτεσσιν, 860
 ἐπτὰ δὲ Βριμῷ κουροτρόφον ἀγκαλέσασα,
 Βριμῷ νυκτιπόλον, χθονίην, ἐνέροισιν ἀνασσαν,
 λυγαίῃ ἐνὶ νυκτί, σὺν ὄρφναίοις φαρέεσσιν.
 μυκηθμῷ δ' ὑπένερθεν ἐρεμνὴ σείετο γαῖα,
 ρίζης τεμνομένης Τιτηνίδος· ἔστνε δ' αὐτὸς 865
 Ἰαπετοῖο πάις ὀδύνῃ περὶ θυμὸν ἀλύνων.

(*Argon.* III, 851-66²)

APOLLONIUS RHODIUS in his *Argonautica* does not call Medea's plant a mandrake, nor does Steier in his long article 'Madrageoras' in Pauly Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie*³ or Frazer in his lengthy treatment of the mandrake in *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*⁴ connect the two plants, but the connection is clearly present in both nature and folklore.

¹ I wish to thank Mr H. W. Stubbs, of the University of Exeter, for first drawing my attention to this topic.

² 'This came forth first born when the flesh-eating eagle let drip to earth on the slopes of Caucasus the blood-like ichor of suffering Prometheus. Its flower coloured like a Corycian crocus appeared a cubit's height above ground, born on twin stalks, while its root resembled newly-cut flesh in the earth. Its dark juice, like that of mountain-oak, she had gathered in a Caspian shell for her magic after first bathing in seven ever-flowing streams and calling seven times in the murky night, clad in dusky garments, on Brimo who is nurse of children, night-wandering Brimo of the world below, queen of the departed. The dark earth beneath quaked and groaned as the Titanian root was severed, and the son of Iapetus himself groaned in agonizing heartfelt pain.'

³ Vol. XIV, 1028-37.

⁴ London, 1918, II, 372-97.

(1) The mandrake is difficult to obtain and correct ritual is essential.⁵ Medea's plant, called the 'herb of Prometheus', *φάρμακον Προμήθειον*, is difficult to obtain also and Medea observed correct time, lustrations, dress and prayers in order to procure it.

(2) Medea's plant, which caused the earth to groan as she tore out the roots (864-5), shares this motif with the later folklore tradition of the mandrake. Shakespeare wrote in *Romeo and Juliet*, IV, 3:

And shrieks like mandrakes torn out of the earth
That living mortals, hearing them, run mad.

The plant shrieked because it was living flesh; Apollonius says that Prometheus himself groaned in agony (865-6).

(3) Both Medea's plant and the mandrake of the middle ages spring from the vital juices of an innocent man. Johann Schmidel in his *Dissertatio de Mandragora*⁶ gives this interesting account:

Ex urina quam homo innocenter ad suspensum furti crimine damnatus inter extrema vitae effuderit, herbam nasci aiunt sub patibulo, foliis latis, flore croceo, radice hominem examussim simulante, pilis quoque et ipsis sexuum notis apparentibus. Nonnulli adiciunt, vitalem fuisse subterraneum hunc foetum.⁷

Thus the mandrake not only shrieks but springs from the urine of an innocent man unjustly condemned for theft. Once again the motif of the mandrake is anticipated by Apollonius who tells us that Medea's plant sprang from the blood of Prometheus,⁸ and Prometheus too was an innocent (from the human viewpoint at

⁵ See Theophrastus, *Historia Plantarum*, IX. viii. 8 and Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, XXV 148.

⁶ Lipsiae, 1671, section 53.

⁷ 'From the urine which a man exudes in the last moments of life when unjustly hanged for theft, it is said that a plant is born — beneath the gallows — with broad leaves and the flower of a crocus. It has a root which exactly resembles a man, even hairs and sexual features are to be found. Some say that this plant was alive underground.'

⁸ Cf. Seneca, *Medea*, 708-9; Propertius I. xii. 9-10; Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica*, VII. 355-60; Ausonius, *Technopaegnion*, X. 10-11. The tradition that Medea's plant sprang from the blood of Prometheus may have affected the tradition of the Moly plant as recorded by Eustathius (*ad Homeri Odysseam*, 1658, 47 f.) who says that according to the mythologist Alexander of Paphos Moly originated from the blood of Pikoloos, a Giant slain by Helios: *καὶ τοῦ αἵματος ἐνέοντος εἰς γῆν φῶναι βοτάνην, καὶ κληθῆναι αὐτὴν μῶλυ διὰ τὸν μῶλον ἦτοι πόλεμον ἐν ᾧ ἔπεσεν ὁ ῥήθεις Γίγας.*

least) who was unjustly condemned as a thief. Urine in the later tradition replaced blood since death by hanging did not involve bloodshed. Both versions may derive ultimately from an original where the plant grew from semen; seed possess generative powers which urine certainly does not, and such seed will account for the human likeness of the plant. An associated motif which has been pushed into the Creation myth is to be found in the story told in Hesiod's *Theogony* (167–201) of how Aphrodite rose from the severed testicles of Ouranos when they were dropped into the sea, while from his fallen blood sprang the Furies, Giants and Melian nymphs.⁹

(4) Schmidel in the above passage also recorded the detail that the mandrake has the flower of a crocus, and this again recalls Apollonius Rhodius who likens Medea's plant to a Corycian crocus (855).¹⁰ Robert Graves remarks that 'Medea's Colchian crocus is the poisonous *colchicum*, or meadow-saffron, used by the ancients as the most reliable specific against gout'.¹¹ If Graves' identification is correct the colour is pale rosy-purple rather than

⁹ Rendel Harris actually thought that Aphrodite developed from the mandrake and says: 'Aphrodite is a personification of the mandrake or love-apple' (*The Ascent of Olympus*, 134; cf. 107 ff.). He cites the lexicographer Hesychius who named Zeus and Aphrodite under *Μανδραγόρας* and *Μανδραγορίτις* respectively, but overlooks the connection mentioned in the text. Compare also the Hindu goddess of love and beauty, Lakshmi, who was born from the churning Ocean riding on a lotus, and the Hittite goddess of love who was born from the castrated member of the sky-god Anu.

That 'seed from a serpent's jaws' will beget earthborn men complete with bronzen armour (Apollonius, *Argonautica*, III. 498–9) was doubtless taken over from the foundation ritual in the Cadmus story (for references see Frazer on Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, III. iv. 1), though it again recalls the Hesiodic *Theogony* where the Furies and Giants sprang from the blood of Ouranos complete with armour and spears (183–7: on these lines see M. L. West's recent commentary). The incident with the men born from dragon-seed makes an interesting variation to the story, but plays no integral part besides providing an additional ordeal for Jason; it is missing in the earlier Pindaric version (see *Pythian Odes*, IV. 224–46).

Apollonius thus named the plant 'the herb of *Prometheus*' aptly. Prometheus had not been castrated nor had he sprung from spilt blood. But he was a Titan and drops of his blood were readily available in the Caucasus locality. Any plant springing from the vital juices of a supernatural person may be expected to have supernatural powers.

¹⁰ It is surely significant that Jason wears a saffron garment according to Pindar, *Pythian Odes*, IV. 232–3. What seems strange is that Jason should cast off this *κρόκεον/κροκόεν εἶμα* just before the fray, whereas according to Apollonius (III. 854–5) Jason smears on juices culled from the saffron plant in order to form a magical protection against the flames of Aetes' bulls and the stroke of bronze.

¹¹ *Greek Myths*, II, 240.

yellow, as is often thought. The crocus of the Corycian cave in Cilicia (renowned in Strabo, Pliny and Horace)¹² is also said to have sprung from blood;¹³ and similar stories are grouped by Ovid.¹⁴ Such legends may originate in the East where the anemone got its colour red from the blood shed by the torn feet of the goddess in search of Adonis.¹⁵ The mandrake has yellow apples and purple flowers according to Robert Graves and R. Patai in their commentary on Genesis, xxx, 14-16.¹⁶

(5) There is a further tradition, also recorded by Schmidel in the passage quoted above, that the mandrake root has human form with shoots resembling the human genitalia.¹⁷ These features doubtless explain why the mandrake was used as an aphrodisiac. That this custom was known to the East in ancient times is attested by Genesis, xxx, 14-16 and Canticles, VII, 10-13, if we can trust the Septuagint translation which renders Hebrew *dûdâ'im* by *μανδραγόραι* or *μηλα μανδραγορων*. A vestige of this custom may be present in Apollonius' account. Ostensibly Medea gave Jason the magic juice of the plant to help him obtain the Golden Fleece. But Medea's prominent, though secondary, desire for Jason as lover and husband¹⁸ is relevant in connection with the mandrake's known aphrodisiacal powers. The precise botanical — as distinct from folklorist — identification of Medea's plant with the mandrake is of little importance since poets are often notoriously bad botanists. One feature of the plant is remarkable however and invalidates Graves' straight identification with *colchicum*. The flower is 'born on twin stalks' (856). If *καυλός* means a stalk above ground, as it means elsewhere (antiquity could not agree as to whether the mandrake had a stem or not)¹⁹ it looks as though Apollonius may have misunderstood tradition and regarded the stalk, rather than the root, as forked. Nevertheless

¹² Strabo, *Geography*, 670; Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, XXI, 31; Horace, *Satires*, II, iv, 68.

¹³ See especially Galen, ed. Kühn, *Medicorum Graecorum Opera*, XIII, p. 269.

¹⁴ *Fasti*, V, 223-9.

¹⁵ T. H. Gaster, 'Some Ancient Oriental Folklore', *F.L.* 49 (1938), pp. 343-4.

¹⁶ *Hebrew Myths*, 219-20.

¹⁷ Readers may judge for themselves the truth of these resemblances from illustrations of male and female mandrakes which are reproduced by R. Harris, *op. cit.* facing pp. 107-15.

¹⁸ Cf. Pindar, *Pythian Odes*, IV, 220-3.

¹⁹ Cf. Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, XXV, 147-50 with Dioscurides, ed. Kühn, *Medicorum Graecorum Opera*, XXV, p. 570.

as the ensuing passage makes clear, the importance of the root is uppermost in the poet's mind. We may note in passing that Medea carefully tended the plant. Mandrakes were kept as fetishes or talismans in the East, but the habit might independently arise quite naturally. The present writer recalls an instance where a forked parsnip was presented to a honeymoon couple, although neither givers nor receivers admitted acquaintance with the folk lore tradition of the mandrake.

(6) Whoever tears up the mandrake must die, and frequently a dog is therefore made to tear up the root by attachment to its body. C. B. Randolph in his invaluable article 'The Mandragora of the Ancients in Folk-lore and Medicine'²⁰ expresses his belief that many features of the later mandrake superstition — including some already mentioned — were transferred to it from other plants. The dog motif he traces to Josephus' tale about *baaras*²¹ and to Aelian's story about *cynospastus* or *aglaophotis*.²² Since Josephus' plant is named after Baaras near the Dead Sea and Pliny says that *aglaophotis* grows in eastern Arabia,²³ Randolph believes that this motif is to be traced to the East. Frazer²⁴ notes that according to Jewish tradition the mandrake is procured by tying the root to an ass, and thinks that the writer of Genesis may have known but suppressed this detail. If so Randolph's conjecture is confirmed and the motif is earlier than Aelian, Josephus, or even Apollonius Rhodius. No such motif is narrated in Apollonius' account. He does say that Medea was fawned upon by 'whining' beasts who trembled before her as she journeyed to give Jason the magic drug (883-4); it is possible that Apollonius knew the dog motif but suppressed it thus. That Apollonius did not say that the root was pulled out by a dog matters little because Medea, although human, has supernatural gifts and takes supernatural precautions which form an adequate prophylactic to protect her from the dangers.

²⁰ *Proc. Amer. Acad. of Arts and Sci.*, 40 (1905), 485-537.

²¹ *Bellum Judaicum*, VII, 6, 3.

²² *De Natura Animalium*, XIV, 27.

²³ *Naturalis Historia*, XXIV, 160.

²⁴ *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, II, 393.